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ABSTRACT

The modified American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Educational Testing Service (ACTFL/ETS) oral proficiency scale was developed in response to a request from the New Brunswick (Canada) Department of Education for assistance in comparing the results of its French immersion and core programs. Because the existing ACTFL/ETS academic language scale provided inadequate discrimination for the skills of immersion students, two researchers interviewed students from both the core and the immersion programs in grades 7 through 9 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and developed a provisional rating scale, a set of sample or practice tapes with descriptions of the speech samples, and a set of test tapes for interview raters. Some of the findings were the following: there was no overlap of oral proficiencies between the core and immersion students; with the exception of pronunciation, the unmodified novice level descriptions applied to the core students; the modified ratings, labeled "junior," include some content areas typically rated "novice"; the differences within the relatively fluent immersion group were primarily in their abilities to discuss familiar or unfamiliar, complex situations, and concrete or abstract ideas. The major limiting factor was their speech accuracy. The junior rating scale descriptions are included. (MSE)

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PROVISIONAL

MODIFIED ACTFL/ETS ORAL PROFICIENCY SCALE FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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BACKGROUND

This project was initiated in 1983 by the New Brunswick, Canada, Department of Education who asked ETS for assistance in evaluating the success of one aspect, the students' speaking ability, of the French immersion program available to anglophone school children in New Brunswick. Specifically, the Department of Education was interested in finding meaningful measures to assess the oral proficiency in French of junior high school students who had participated in both the immersion and core programs of study.

In New Brunswick, students of English speaking families (anglophone) that register for the "core" program of language study receive instruction in French for one class period a day, usually starting in the first grade. Students who participate in the "immersion" program receive all their instruction in French from the first school day of first grade, even though they may never have been exposed to French before that time. These students do not learn to read English until the fifth grade. After the fifth grade, the number of classes in English gradually increases until half the classes are in English at the end of junior high (9th grade).

Since the mid 1970's the province of New Brunswick had been using the U.S. government Foreign Service Institute (FSI) scale to evaluate the oral proficiency of graduating high school seniors in both French and English (as second languages). Not surprisingly, they found this scale inadequate for discriminating the oral proficiency in French among junior high school students since that scale was not developed for academic use.

ETS's first response to the request from the New Brunswick Department of Education was to submit the ACTFL/ETS Academic rating scale for their consideration, since this scale provides for greater discrimination at the lower levels than does the FSI scale. The Department of Education did not consider the descriptions of the various levels relevant to their students and asked ETS to listen to taped interviews of some of their junior high school students. Minor revisions based on some of these tapes (such as changing all references to professional or work-related topics to school-related topics) still proved to be

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unsatisfactory. The New Brunswick Department of Education continued to maintain that the descriptors of the ACTFL/ETS Academic rating scale simply did not pertain to students from immersion classes. For example, they claimed that the majority of the students could do more than "satisfy most work/school requirements and show some ability to communicate on concrete topics related to particular interests and special fields of competence" (Advanced level on ACTFL/ETS scale). Yet it seemed unreasonable to assume that all the students were at or above the Advanced level. Surely, there was a possibility that greater variation in speaking ability existed among these students. Furthermore, although each level of the academic rating scale is intended to cover a fairly broad range of oral proficiency, a scale that fails to discriminate among the majority of the population it is intended to serve is necessarily of limited usefulness.

Therefore it was decided that we (Kate Rabiteau and Hessy Taft) would go to New Brunswick to conduct interviews for junior high school students in both core and immersion programs.

THE STUDY

In April and in June 1984, we interviewed students in grades 7 through 9 in Fredericton, New Brunswick. In April, school teachers selected the students to be interviewed. In June, ETS staff selected students by holding screening sessions with large numbers of students. The screening sessions consisted of informal introductions on the part of the students and statements about their major interests. Separate screening sessions were held for students from "core" and "immersion" programs. Students were deliberately chosen to represent the broadest ranges of speech samples possible.

The outcomes of the study are a provisional rating scale of oral proficiency applicable to junior high school students, a set of sample or practice tapes with descriptions of the speech samples, and a set of test tapes for prospective raters of the oral proficiency interview. The manual that accompanied these materials was essentially the ACTFL/ETS manual on oral proficiency.

THE FINDINGS

The results obtained from this study were most interesting. First of all, it became immediately apparent that there was no overlap of oral proficiencies between the students in core and immersion programs. In fact we found that students fell into a bi-modal distribution whereby students from core programs rarely attained a rating higher than the equivalent of Novice-High and students from immersion programs rarely attained ratings below the equivalent of Intermediate-High.

Secondly, we found that, with one exception, the ACTFL/ETS descriptions for the Novice levels were quite applicable to rating the speech samples of students from the core programs. This is not surprising at the lowest levels of the scale. The one exception is the reference to pronunciation which generally ceases to be a matter of much concern when dealing with students exposed to French in the early grades. By and large, these students are intelligible even to native speakers not used to dealing with foreigners. This being the case, references to intonation and articulation were not included in the rating scale that was developed for junior students.

On the other hand, the revised rating scale, which provisionally consists of the ACTFL/ETS labels preceeded by the word "Junior", includes in the descriptors some content areas typically associated with Novice-level speech. Since students at the Novice level do not create with language but rely on learned materials, it seemed appropriate to us to include typical low level content areas in the descriptors.

The situation for students from the immersion programs was quite revealing. Most of the 12-,13-, or 14-year olds we interviewed had remarkable fluency, being able to process speech sufficiently well to produce utterances of considerable lengths, indeed to sustain dialogue and show considerable ability to create with language. Students in this group were generally willing, indeed eager, to provide description and narration. Many even showed little hesitancy to contradict or to present an argument. The differences among students from this group were evident primarily in their relative abilities to discuss familiar and unfamiliar topics, to deal with complicated or unfamiliar situations, and to discuss concrete or abstract ideas.

The major limiting factor among these students was the accuracy of their speech, which trailed considerably behind their ability to function in the language generally or to tackle content/context issues appropriately. For example, students would typically be able to communicate their thoughts about current, past and future activities but errors in both formation and selection of tense forms were frequent. On the content level, a student might attempt to explain why the invasion of Normandy in World War II was necessary or venture an opinion on whether military service should be required for everyone, both examples of higher level topics. Neither of the students who responded to these questions were actually rated as Superior because they did not respond satisfactorily to the probes: they could not sustain discourse at that level and their ability to handle the accuracy of the language was much too limited. These are unusual topics for 13-14 year olds to discuss even in their native language but we did encounter some students who could respond appropriately on such content/context areas. This observation is supported by repeated evidence of extensive or low frequency vocabulary. However, for the majority of immersion students there were significant gaps in their mastery of the

morphological system of the language. Although most students had little trouble joining sentences for general discourse, the lack of control of syntactic structures, (some simple, some complex) was widespread. Errors in basic structures such as "mon frère, il est 6 ans" or "j'ai resté, j'ai allé" were common and appeared to have formed a pattern. (On the other hand, "j'ai faim" or "j'ai froid" were commonly used correctly with no interference from English in these instances). For most immersion students, the errors in their speech generally did not interfere with understanding. However, in the case of weaker students in this group, errors did occasionally inhibit the comprehension of the message.

It is not clear why some of these grammar errors persist. Perhaps teachers choose to deemphasize them in an attempt not to inhibit speech in young speakers. Much research is needed on the subject, particularly on the sequence of acquisition of language skills in young learners.

Heidi Byrnes notes in an article recently submitted for publication that "increasing evidence from immersion projects.... indicates that naturalistic acquirers in those surroundings fall short on a wide variety of morpho-syntactic constructions and, in fact, seem to be fossilizing in their language use". Byrnes suggests that formal language instruction may serve to inhibit "the use of ungrammatical though communicatively effective constructions". The introduction and sequencing of such instruction in the case of young learners is a recurrent theme deserving attention. As Byrnes states, "What is necessary is evidence from a longitudinal study controlling for the various types of input, naturalistic or instructed, and then comparing the language use of the respective groups".

In the present study, it seemed reasonable that the rating scale for the intermediate and advanced levels for juniors would be more applicable to junior students if the function criteria were made somewhat more stringent than those described in the ACTFL/ETS academic rating scale and the accuracy criteria were made somewhat more lenient. The descriptions were modified to incorporate these shifts.[1]

One of the major features in which the junior scale differs from the ACTFL/ETS academic rating scale is that the junior scale does not require evidence of firm control of both past and future time to be rated at the Advanced level. We would like to point out that if this were not the case, the overwhelming majority of

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[1] The second paragraphs of the descriptions for Advanced and Superior levels pertain to aspects of grammar specifically applicable to French and can be deleted for more general nonlanguage-specific descriptions.

the students in the immersion programs would fall into the Intermediate High category.

We should also point out that the "areas of weakness" regarding accuracy in the Advanced Plus level of the ACTFL/ETS academic rating scale are probably intended to refer to the speech of a testee under stress. Repeated evidence of such areas of weakness would not, in practice, merit an Advanced Plus rating.

In the junior scale under consideration, we have placed such areas of weakness in the Jr. Advanced level rather than Advanced Plus level because stress does not appear to be a major factor inhibiting a testee's speech at that level. While at first glance, it may appear that we are setting more stringent standards for accuracy than the ACTFL/ETS scale, in fact this is not the case. The "areas of weakness" in question can be expected to be routine at the Jr. Advanced level. This practice is consistent with a more lenient approach to accuracy for junior students.

An example of the more stringent requirements for functioning in the language is found in the ability to handle complicated situations. The junior scale at the Advanced level expects students to have "some facility in handling complications or difficulties" and in particular be able to communicate effectively complications arising from a familiar situation (such as calling for help when an accident has occurred). Students at this level are expected to be adept at problem solving. The ACTFL/ETS Advanced level requires similar capabilities in practice although they are only indirectly implied in the description itself.

A typical example of a student at the Advanced level on the junior rating scale would be one who can respond to a hypothetical situation with relevant vocabulary and appropriately connected sequences or utterances but with relatively weak control of certain grammatical structures.

The junior level academic rating scale also contains a description of a Superior level performance. Since no modifications are required when dealing with speakers capable of expressing abstract thought, the description is, in fact, no different from the ACTFL/ETS description. (It is therefore not prefaced by the word "junior"). The Superior level has been described here because a few of the speakers were found to be at that level. There was thus a clear need to illustrate the key features that characterize the higher levels of speech and to document in the description some of the valuable information provided at ACTFL/ETS led oral proficiency workshops. The revised junior academic scale is truncated at the Superior Plus level.

CONCLUSION:

The immediate goal of this project was to adapt the ACTFL/ETS rating scale to the situation of second language students in New Brunswick elementary and junior high schools. The long range goal that was foremost in our considerations was to write descriptions for a junior academic rating scale that would have wide applicability across languages for young learners in a wide variety of second language programs. Because it was apparent that the sequence of language acquisition among young learners in immersion programs appears not to be the same as that described in the academic ACTFL/ETS scale, different emphases were placed on the components of the functional trisection of the oral proficiency rating scale. One should note that the oral proficiency of young learners in more traditional programs such as the core program described in this study was confined largely to the Novice levels and conformed closely to the corresponding ACTFL/ETS descriptions.

In any modification of the rating scale, it should be of paramount importance to make the descriptions sufficiently distinct from each other to permit high rater reliability among users while maintaining the broad characteristics of language acquisition of the intended population. It would be of interest to ascertain whether the findings obtained in this study can be corroborated by further investigation of the speaking performance of students in other immersion programs.

ACADEMIC ORAL PROFICIENCY RATING SCALE
(Jr. High School and Above)

Rating	Description
0	No ability whatsoever in the language.
Jr. Novice Low	Unable to function in the spoken language Oral production is limited to occasional isolated words or expressions that are cognates of English words. Essentially no ability to communicate.
Jr. Novice Mid	Able to operate only in a very limited capacity within very predictable areas of need. Vocabulary limited to that necessary to express basic courtesy formulae and to identify components in several of the following subject areas: basic objects, colors, clothing, numbers, family members, food,months, time, weather, weekdays, year. Syntax is fragmented, inflections and word endings frequently omitted, confused or distorted and the majority of utterances consist of isolated words or short phrases. Speakers at this level do not show evidence of creating with language or being able to cope with simple situations. Speech is limited to phrases rather than complete sentences and is marked by frequent long pauses. Repetition of interlocuter's words is often necessary.
Jr. Novice High	Able to satisfy immediate needs using learned utterances. There is no real autonomy of expression, although there are some emerging signs of spontaneity and flexibilty. There is a slight increase in utterance length but frequent long pauses still occur. Comprehension is often limited enough to inhibit normal conversation. Can ask questions or make statements with reasonable accuracy only where this involves short memorized utterances or formulae. Can handle with confidence vocabulary related to ~~any~~ most of the following subject areas: basic objects, colors, clothing, numbers, family members, food, months, time, weather, weekdays, year. Can handle general high frequency utterances. Is sometimes but not consistently able to remember learned elements to produce simple original sentences. At times, can handle simple situations but cannot sustain performance that demonstrates ability to create with language. Usually unable to make one's needs known and communicate essential information in a simple survival situation. There is some concept of the present tense forms of the verbs and some common irregular verbs, although use is limited primarily to first person singular and first and second person plural. There is some use of articles, indicating a concept of gender, although mistakes are numerous.

Rating	Description
Jr. Intermediate Low	Able to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy requirements. In areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics, can ask and answer simple questions, initiate and respond to simple statements, and maintain very simple face-to-face conversations. When asked to do so, is able to formulate simple questions. Most utterances are limited to simple sentences and contain fractured syntax or other grammatical errors. Vocabulary adequate to express basic elementary needs such as ordering a meal or asking for directions, and to handle simple exchanges of information pertaining to daily activities. Misunderstandings may still arise due to limited comprehension. There is some control of the present tense of regular verbs and the more common irregular verbs and of gender, number, and subject-verb agreement. Can give simple answers in the negative. Little precision in information conveyed owing to tentative state of grammatical development and little or no use of modifiers.
Jr. Intermediate Mid	Able to show some spontaneity in language production and to initiate and sustain simple dialogue. Vocabulary permits discussion of topics beyond basic survival needs. Can use language creatively can maintain simple face-to-face conversation. Can talk simply about autobiographical details, leisure time activies and daily schedule. Comprehension good enough so as not to interfere with normal conversation. Some grammatical accuracy in basic constructions, i.e., subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective and gender agreement for familiar vocabulary, present tense of regular verbs and common irregular verbs. May have a concept of past time, but can use only isolated past tense forms which have been learned as vocabulary items. Syntax in most simple declarative sentences is generally correct, including placement of most common adjectives.
Jr. Intermediate High	Able to show considerable spontaneity in language production and to initiate and sustain general conversation. Developing flexibility in a range of circumstances beyond immediate survival needs. Can use language creatively to initiate and sustain routine conversation but accuracy may be uneven. Ability to describe and give precise information is limited to present tense. Other tense forms occur although errors in formation and selection are frequent. Is able to produce some narration in present, past and/or future time but cannot sustain performance at this level. Can use most question forms. While some word order is established, errors still occur in more complex patterns. Speaking performance is often uneven (strong in either grammar or vocabulary, but not both, for example) but shows remarkable fluency. Cannot sustain coherent structures in longer utterances by the use of conjunctions or relative clauses. Some control of past tense forms and basic reflexive verbs. May be able to use some direct and indirect object pronouns, although syntax may still be faulty.

Rating	Description
Jr. Advanced	Able to satisfy routine work or school requirements and to communicate in a limited manner on concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Can handle with confidence most social situations related to work or school requirements including some facility in handling complications or difficulties arising from these. Has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to respond, with circumlocutions, on concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Can narrate, describe, and explain in present, past, and future time although errors still occur. Can communicate facts -- what, who, when, where, how much -- and can explain points of view in an uncomplicated fashion, but cannot conjecture or coherently support an opinion. Can talk in a general way about topics of current public interest (e.g., student rules and regulations), as well as personal interest. Can make factual comparisons, such as high school life vs. college life or elementary school life. Can communicate needs and thoughts in a familiar situation with a complication (e.g., calling for help when an accident has occurred). Speaking performance shows high degree of fluency and ease of speech. Areas of weakness in grammar can range from simple constructions such as noun-adjective, gender, and subject-verb agreement to more complex structures such as tense usage (imperfect vs. passé composé), and relative clauses. Is able to use the partitive (affirmative and negative), demonstrative adjectives, most expressions of quantity, most adverbs, and some idiomatic expressions.
Jr. Advanced Plus	Able to satisfy most work or school requirements and to communicate on most concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Can handle with confidence work or school requirements involving complications that arise in daily life. Can talk about facts related to topics of social importance or current interests. Generally quite adept in using circumlocutions in unfamiliar situations dealing with concrete topics. Can occasionally give supported opinions or respond to hypothetical situations but responses are often fractured and limited to simple structures. Can narrate and describe comfortably in present, past, and future time. Vocabulary is broad enough for fluent speech although searching for every day words may still be evident. Can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately, such as the present, past, future tenses of regular and irregular verbs. Has good control of the reflexive and impersonal form of verbs and of imperatives. However, use of conditional sentences is unstable. Can link sentences together by using conjunctions and subordinate clauses. Is able to use adjectives (including tout, comparative and superlative forms) correctly, and can handle object pronouns, interrogative pronouns, relative pronouns, negative patterns other than ne ... pas, most prepositions and some idiomatic expressions. Generally, syntax is correct and word order is sustained with all pronouns, including y and en. Grasps but does not control the basic differences in usage between the passé composé and the imperfect (repeated or continuous vs. single action in the past, etc.) so that mistakes are to be expected.

Rating	Description
Superior	Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. Can discuss particular interests, special fields of competence, current events and societal problems effectively by supporting opinions in thorough manner. Can respond with considerable ease to hypothetial situations and discussions of abstract concepts. Vocabulary is extensive and groping for words is rare. Shows familiarity with idiomatic expressions and facility with lower frequency utterances that permit discussion of topics in unfamiliar situations. Control of grammar strong enough so that use of structures and syntax reveal no major patterns of error in basic constructions. Able to argue and debate a point of view. Good control of passé compose vs. imperfect; uses the present subjunctive appropriately most of the time. Shows control of si clauses, particularly in hypothetical statements. Correct use of the future tense with conjunctions such as quand, des que, etc., and good control of negations, including ne...ni...ni, negation of the infinitive, and ne...que.
Superior Plus	(Not applicable to junior students) ALL PERFORMANCE ABOVE SUPERIOR IS RATED SUPERIOR PLUS. (Corresponds to Level 3+ or higher in U.S. Government Defense Language Institute Rating Scale.) Performance is characterized by awareness of sociolinguistic cultural factors, some facility with colloquialisms, ability to counsel, persuade, and negotiate convincingly in the language, and ability to tailor speech to the target audience; errors of pronounciation and grammar are quite rare; can handle informal interpreting from and into the language.